

CRISTINA FRÍES

Sister, Answer Me

Sister, you who are so tall and can see out the window when I cannot, tell me, is that the sound of our mother coming home? It is late, I am sleepy, and I want to be held in her arms.

No, it is not our mother, but a black truck swerving into our circular driveway, driving over the rose bushes, and parking on the front lawn.

Sister, you who are older than me, tell me, is that the sound of our neighbors knocking on the window to check that we are safe and warm on this night like many others when father has gone looking for our mother?

No, it is not our neighbors, but five men trying to open a downstairs window, and oh, rejoicing as they slide themselves like snakes into our home.

Sister, are you sure? Put your ear against the bedroom door and tell me, is that not the sound of our friends sneaking into the kitchen to make you a cake for your birthday tomorrow?

No, they are not our friends, but men opening the refrigerator, smashing the bottles of cider and shoveling handfuls of tonight's spaghetti into their mouths.

Sister, you whose stories always make me feel less afraid, tell me, is that the sound of our father coming to swear that he will never drive mother out of the house again?

No, be quiet, it is not our father, but someone filling duffel bags with laptops, jewelry, bottles of aged wine, knocking mother's vases onto the floor.

Sister, you who used to tell me to ignore anything unpleasant that happens outside our bedroom, tell me, can't we ignore these intruders?

No, we cannot ignore them, they are five desperate men who will do anything to feed their children.

Sister, you who invited the whole school to your seventeenth birthday tomorrow, open the door now and tell these men to leave us alone so that you can be celebrated by two hundred strangers, get drunk, sneak a boy up to your room again, which is what you want, isn't it, to distract mother and father from their fighting?

No, I won't let those men find us. Come and we will hide in the closet.

Sister, if our problems are ours and theirs are theirs, isn't it true that I can open the bedroom door and watch them pass through our home like ghosts that will never truly hurt us?

No, these men are real, and if you open the door, we will not go unseen and unheard as we are by our parents.

Sister, I've opened the door, and can see them stripping the paintings off the walls. They've heard you gasp, and now they see us in the shadow of the doorway. Tell me, why are they looking at us so fearfully?

They are surprised to see us, and now that they've entered our room, they have no choice but to push us onto the bed, and bind our wrists and ankles with zip ties, as they are now. See what you've done? They've covered our heads with those bags, and now we cannot see.

Sister, you who have recently grown so distant from me, walking around like you think you live not here but on the moon, tell me, aren't these men just an empty threat, and years from now when we are older and have married, become artists like we've always wanted, and rich ourselves, won't tonight's events only seem like a small blip in an otherwise beautiful and distant dream?

Sister, answer me. I heard the bed squeak once, and now the weight of you beside me is gone, but tell me, sister, are you still thinking of an answer to my question, which is so dependent on what happens next, that you cannot tell me yet, not yet, and still, not yet?

CRISTINA FRÍES is a fiction writer. Her story "New Years in La Calera," published originally in EPOCH Literary Magazine (Vol. 66 No. 3), won a PEN America Award. She is pursuing an M.A. in Creative Writing at UC Davis, and is at work on a collection of short stories.